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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

1. The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts believes the girl child must be at the centre of efforts to implement the Beijing Platform for Action, and that the access and participation of women and girls in education, training and employment are of crucial importance in ensuring girls and women's equality and empowerment.

2. Eliminating all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls is an essential prerequisite to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the successful implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Yet progress in eliminating discrimination and violence has been at best slow, and at worst, absent.

Agreements and commitments already made

3. The importance of ensuring that girls and young women have access to good quality, non-biased education and training is well documented in numerous United Nations and other reports. As well, the Beijing Platform for Action highlights this need by:

- Asserting the right to education as a human right and an essential tool in achieving equality and in ensuring women can become "agents of change" (para. 69)
- Highlighting that discrimination in girls' access to education persists in many places and that factors such as customary attitudes, early marriage and pregnancy play a part in this, as well as the lack of adequate non-biased, gender-sensitive teaching materials and the risk of sexual harassment (para. 71)
- Highlighting that investment must be made in both formal and non-formal education and training for girls and women (para. 69)
- Asserting that curricula need to stop reinforcing traditional stereotypes and gender biases and instead be sensitive to the specific needs of girls and women, and that lack of education in the area of sexual and reproductive health is damaging for girls and women (para. 74)

4. Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3 also recognize that universal access to primary education and the empowerment of girls and women are of key importance in tackling global poverty and ensuring just and sustainable societies and futures.

5. The importance of eliminating violence and discrimination against women and the girl child is also well documented. The Beijing Platform for Action highlights this need in:

- Asserting that discrimination against women begins at the earliest stages of life and must therefore be addressed from then onwards (para. 38)
- Asserting that violence against women presents an obstacle in achieving equality, development and peace, and that violence against women prevents them from enjoying their fundamental human rights (para. 112)

- Recognizing that violence against women has high social, health and economic costs for society (para. 117)
- Recommending that educational systems must promote self-respect, mutual respect and cooperation between men and women (para. 119)
- Recognizing that the girl child is often discriminated against from childhood and that as a result of this discrimination fewer girls survive into adulthood than boys (para. 259)

6. The United Nations Secretary-General has also made violence against women and girls a priority area in his UNiTE to end Violence against Women campaign, and the formation of the new UN Women entity demonstrates that there is international commitment to end the cycle of discrimination that girls are faced with from birth. However, to date, progress in eliminating violence has been incredibly slow.

Girls suffer disproportionally

7. The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts recognizes that girls and young women suffer disproportionally in seeking to fulfil their potential and experience a safe and fulfilling life. Access to education and the quality of that education still has a significant gender bias, with girls constituting 70 per cent of the world's 130 million out-of-school children and 42 million fewer girls than boys in primary school. Girls who miss out on primary education grow up to become the women who make up two thirds of the world's 875 million illiterate people and every year of schooling lost represents a 10-20 per cent reduction in girls' future incomes.

8. Restrictive cultural practices limit girls' opportunities, constrain their roles to that of caregiver and domestic helper and put them at risk of illness, neglect and violence. Patriarchal family structures tend to prioritize the needs of boys over those of girls. Economic hardship can mean that many parents co-opt their children, especially girls, as additional labour resources.

9. Even if girls are educated, their earning potential is often lower than that of men as fewer women study subjects that lead to economic success. Women who are in employment still suffer from huge gaps in pay and equal status at work. Women are more likely to be in dangerous, insecure, poorly paid jobs. Technological advances over the last decade have been enormous, yet girls are often the last to benefit and are hugely underrepresented in the areas of technology and science.

10. Other obstacles to girls' education include a shortage of school space, lack of female teachers, long distances to travel, unaffordable fees, lack of sanitary facilities and cultural norms that reinforce women's traditional roles.

11. It is estimated that 60 million girls are assaulted on their way to or from school every year, and that violence and sexual abuse within schools, often carried out by teachers, is a major risk for girls attending school. Violence against girls and young women can also have serious consequences for their health, undermine their self-esteem and reinforce gender biases and cultural stereotypes.

12. This epidemic of violence has been described by the United Nations Secretary-General as one of the most heinous, systematic and prevalent human rights abuses in

the world. Girls are particularly vulnerable to violence, being discriminated against both as females and as children. They are vulnerable to violence in the home and at school, and they are at high risk of harmful practices such as early marriage or female genital mutilation.

Girls are the most crucial constituents for change

13. Yet we know that girls and young women are the most crucial constituencies in our communities if we want to transform opportunities for all and ensure a sustainable future for humankind.

14. More than 600 million girls live in the developing world. Transforming the lives of girls and young women is the beginning of a powerful and sustainable process of change. By taking a life cycle approach and addressing the needs and priorities of girls and young women, adults and older women benefit. By empowering girls and the women they will become, entire families and communities are pushed out of poverty and away from hunger. Educated girls and young women earn more money, start their families later and have fewer children. Empowered and educated girls become women who invest in their families and start a process of education and care that breaks the poverty cycle and changes family and community perceptions of girls from being a burden to being valued and worthy.

15. Despite knowing that investment in girls is the most powerful response to many of the dilemmas facing humankind, international progress in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and achieving the Millennium Development Goals is slow, and specifically with respect to the girl child, often even slower. Less than half a cent of every United States dollar spent on international assistance programmes is invested directly in girls.

16. And although violence against girls and women is a priority of the Secretary-General and his UNiTE campaign and the elimination of violence against women and girls is recognized as essential in the Beijing Platform for Action, violence against women and girls remains an epidemic: up to 70 per cent of women and girls globally will suffer from violence or abuse in their lifetimes.

Non-formal education empowers girls

17. The World Association believes that non-formal education needs to play a significant role in the way girls and young women are educated and enabled to claim their rights. Non-formal education makes an important contribution to the full personal and social development of an individual.

18. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization definition of education recognizes three distinct types: formal education, informal education and non-formal education; non-formal education is defined as organized educational activity outside the established formal system that is intended to serve an identifiable learning clientele with identifiable learning objectives. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, involvement in girls' organizations over extended periods has a positive impact on girls' civic participation and in counteracting societal pressures.

19. Through its mission to "enable girls and young women to discover their fullest potential as responsible citizens of the world", the World Association is placing the girl child at the centre of the solution. Education and leadership programmes, community action and advocacy campaigns reach out to 10 million girls and young women and their communities in 145 countries.

Call to action

20. The World Association calls on the international community, national Governments and civil society to ensure that girls and young women can grow to fulfil their fullest potential, and highlights the need for them to do more in the areas of education, training and employment and in eliminating violence and discrimination against the girl child. It urges the international community, national Governments and civil society:

- To support organizations involved in the promotion of the education of girls and young women;
- To invest in the education and training of girls and young women;
- To increase political commitment to give women's and girls' education and employment a higher priority;
- To promote the right of all girls to a comprehensive education and the equal importance of education for girls and boys;
- To introduce poverty-reduction strategies to ensure that the right to education is the right of every child;
- To ensure that no girl is at risk of violence as the result of seeking an education;
- To ensure that the learning environment is suitable for girls and that access to sanitary facilities and products are provided;
- To eliminate gender discrimination including through the promotion of educational programmes that challenge traditional attitudes of men and boys towards women and girls;
- To introduce curricula that are gender sensitive and promote equality of boys and girls;
- To provide universal access to basic social and education services;
- To ensure that girls and women have access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights education;
- To recognize non-formal education as a positive method of learning;
- To support the use of non-formal education as a way of providing a participatory learning environment that promotes positive images of girls and young women and that offers the opportunity for girls and boys to gain life skills and make informed choices;
- To commit to making the issue of violence against girls and women, and particularly the issue of violence against girls and young women, a priority;

- To commit to further research into violence against girls and young women and ensure that this is made a priority;
- To ensure the full enforcement of laws that prohibit violence against girls and women.